

~~TOP SECRET~~

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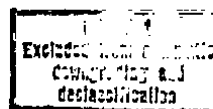
MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Effect of an Intensified US Effort in Vietnam

It is easy to show that the most reasonable and prudent response of the Communists to the intensified US military effort would be to back down, at least part way. Accordingly, this memorandum argues that they are likely to back down, sooner or later. But it is also emphasized that the Communists do not always do what seems to us most reasonable and prudent, and therefore that an estimate based on this kind of argument must be highly qualified and uncertain.

The Communist Dilemma

1. For many months our estimates have emphasized the crucial importance of the fact that the Communists believed they were winning the war and needed only to maintain their momentum until the GVN collapsed of its own internal defects. This confidence explained their willingness to endure bomb damage to the DRV and to accept other aspects of the increasing US commitment. That confidence is now undermined both by recent military successes against them and by evidence that the US is willing to keep on escalating rather than withdraw. The situation has become far more dangerous and discouraging than they had expected. For the

~~TOP SECRET~~

first time in years their policy no longer appears to be leading them unfalteringly toward their objectives. At best victory must seem to them much further off than it did a few months ago.

2. Communist declarations and commitments to the struggle remain as firm as ever. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that as the US military effort intensifies the Communists will simply continue the conflict along present lines -- indeed it may be impossible for them to do so. What, then, will they do? An unqualified answer to this question would be irresponsible, but in the following paragraphs we suggest the main options open to them, and then make some tentative judgments.

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3. To diminish the intensity of conflict when faced with too powerful opposing forces, and to seek both respite and advantage through negotiations, is a tactic which has often been employed by Communists. We believe that the DRV and its allies would not feel that in resorting to this tactic they were surrendering their chances of taking over South Vietnam. Rather, they would do so in the belief that the takeover might thereby be accomplished

- 2 -

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

more cheaply and easily, and that at worst it would only be postponed. They would hope that the intermediate objective of a withdrawal of US forces from the area might be obtained by other means than armed conflict.

4. Nevertheless a significant reduction in the VC/PAVN military effort would risk an accelerated weakening of VC morale. Available evidence indicates that morale is now spotty among the VC, with defections increasing in recent weeks. The band-wagon psychology generated by expansion of their forces and an almost unbroken string of victories has undoubtedly helped sustain the elan of the majority. Hanoi must be apprehensive that a tactical retreat at this time would cause substantial numbers of the VC to desert, either defecting or heading for home.

5. The Chinese would be particularly worried about the international impact of an obvious ebbing of the Communist tide in Vietnam. Peking's policies count heavily on a successful demonstration in Vietnam of the soundness of Mao's theses on wars of national liberation and on the "paper tiger" status of the US.

- 3 -

TOP SECRET

The Chinese would expect that both the USSR and the US would exploit this blow to Chinese doctrines and prestige.

6. On the other hand, sending large numbers of additional PAVN troops to the South to continue engaging the US/ARVN in battles of multi-battalion or regimental size would risk increased losses and serious defeats. These additional forces would place further burdens on already strained lines of communication, raising doubts about the ability to support them adequately, especially in the face of growing US/GVN interdiction. Furthermore, Peking and Hanoi would probably expect the US to cancel any possible gains by the commitment of additional US military units.

A Temporary Solution

7. Faced with such a dilemma, it seems to us likely that the Communists will try to postpone a major decision, meanwhile probing and watching to see how things develop in the next few months as the present US policy is implemented. It will be some months before all the 125,000 troops and additional aircraft now committed are in place and can make their full impact felt. We believe that the Communists will want to test the American forces, particularly somewhere in the hinterland, away from naval support and coastal

- 4 -

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

supply bases. They may believe that if US troops penetrate very far inland, they can be isolated and destroyed, perhaps giving a critical blow to US morale. The memory of Dien Bien Phu probably looms large in Communist thinking.

8. If such an effort failed, the Communists might next revert to hit-and-run tactics, avoid large-scale combat, and step up sabotage and terrorism. This could cut their combat losses in the South and give them opportunity to extend their control over the rural population. They could carry on this kind of action almost indefinitely, or at least as long as VC morale held up. In this situation, however, a vital question would probably be the effects of US bombing of North Vietnam -- assuming that the US continued such bombing.

9. It may be that the DRV has decided to endure whatever the US can do to it by way of bombing. The rapid proliferation of SAMs, and other AAA defenses, and the delivery of fighter aircraft to North Vietnam may signify a Communist determination to defend the DRV for a long time against the US attacks. They may believe that they can do so with considerable success. Yet the Communists must recognize that they would be at a grave disadvantage in an

- 5 -

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

intensified and protracted air war with the US. We think it highly questionable that they would choose to pursue such an unequal struggle for very long if things were no longer going well for them in the South.

10. Thus, in time, they would probably be forced to a more far-reaching decision -- either to postpone the attempt to take over South Vietnam, or to counter US force on a scale which would almost certainly require direct Chinese participation with high risk of a full-scale Sino-US war. At this point the attitude of the Chinese Communists would be a critical factor in any decision.

The Chinese Communist Attitude

11. We continue to believe that the Chinese leaders are anxious to avoid large-scale war with the US as long as they can do so without paying an unacceptable price. The importance they attach to a victory of Mao's principles in South Vietnam is high, but we believe that they would consider a damping down of the VC effort and postponement of the hoped-for Communist takeover preferable to war with the US.

12. This would be no more than obvious common sense on their part. Unfortunately, however, we cannot always count on the authors

- 6 -

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

of the Great Leap Forward and the Sino-Soviet split to practice what seems like common sense to us. They have been carried away with their own propaganda before, and it could happen again. These isolated leaders, most of whom have seen little of the outside world, have had no real experience with a free society and are probably incapable of understanding its workings. Mao has often said that 90 percent of the people of the world, including those of the United States, are opposed to the "capitalist-imperialist clique" that rules in Washington. Peking has seized upon every bit of news about teach-ins, the student effort to stop troop trains in Berkeley, the Los Angeles riots, journalistic and Congressional criticism of US Vietnam policy, etc., to persuade its own people and its allies and friends that Washington will soon be forced to reverse its policy. It is likely that the Chinese leaders believe that if this much opposition has come to the surface, the US "masses" are seething underneath.

13. In any case, they will be reluctant to abandon their belief that the US lacks the will, stamina, and popular support to carry on the battle in the face of continuing casualties. This might lead them to encourage Hanoi to sustain its pressures

- 7 -

TOP SECRET

beyond what seems reasonable to us, in the expectation that a recession of US will was just around the corner.

14. If the Chinese did decide to move into war with the US, it is possible, as they have often hinted, that they would choose to meet the US on a second front, separate from Vietnam. The Chinese leaders have stated that US forces are already spread far and wide and that the US has few combat-ready divisions to commit to further fighting. From this they might conclude that commitment of the entire PAVN against the US in Vietnam coupled with the commitment of perhaps a half-million Chinese troops to challenge the US elsewhere (e.g., Korea, Laos, Thailand, Burma, the Taiwan Strait) would overwhelm the available US forces. A review of the various second-front options, however, indicates that each of them presents serious problems and complications for Peking. Furthermore, Peking probably estimates that a policy of that sort would be sure to bring the force of US air power, perhaps including nuclear weapons, to bear upon China's military and industrial facilities.

- 8 -

TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET

The Soviet Position

15. We believe that the Soviet leaders would like to see a negotiated settlement fairly soon, and have no desire to risk major war with the US over so remote a problem as Vietnam. It would be wrong, however, to repose too comfortably on this estimate. Moscow is committing itself more and more to the Communist cause in Vietnam; its pronouncements are becoming more truculent, and its supply of weapons to North Vietnam more plentiful. Almost certainly there are "hawks" as well as "doves" in the Kremlin -- men who urge that the US be challenged more vigorously, and that greater risks be taken. If the DRV persists in the struggle and if the conflict becomes more arduous, the Soviet commitment will probably grow correspondingly, and the chance of a sharp US-Soviet confrontation increase.

Conclusion

16. In sum, we would estimate that an intensified US military effort in Vietnam is more likely to cause the Communists eventually to diminish their insurgency, perhaps to negotiate, than to make them escalate toward major war between the US and China. This estimate, however, rests upon no solid evidence; it represents

- 9 -

TOP SECRET

~~TOP SECRET~~

in reality little more than our idea of what would be the most reasonable and prudent line of Communist conduct. Very often the Communists do act in accordance with what we think would be reason and prudence, but sometimes they do not. Moreover, even if the above estimate proved correct, it would still signify only that the prospect is for a long and intricate course of diplomatic, political, and psychological maneuvering.

~~TOP SECRET~~

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